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Telework Beat:

Teaching companies new tricks, Part Two

The EPA uses media attention, training and resources to spur commuter benefits programs.



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Last week we looked at the Clean Air Campaign, which rewards employees and now businesses in the Metro Atlanta region with cash for working at home or using something other than a single occupancy vehicle to get to the office. This week, we turn to the EPA's Best Workplaces for Commuters (BWC) program.

Run in partnership with the Department of Transportation, BWC recognizes companies that offer commuter benefits such as telework, employee transit and van pool subsidies, free emergency rides home, and other alternatives. As incentives, it provides employers free training on commuter benefits topics through the American Management Association and monthly teleconferences with experts on specific topics such as the tax advantages of offering commuter benefits. It also provides resources and materials on its Web site, and a public relations person helps companies get press coverage on their programs.

A lot of smart companies have been using commuter benefits for years to save money on employee recruitment and retention and facilities costs. Part of the idea here is to laud the leaders and inspire others to follow suit.

"Walt Disney eliminated the need to build \$2 million worth of parking structure through its commuting program," program director Stephen Offutt says. "Emory University has determined that it's cheaper to give one employee 30 years of free transit than it is to build them a parking space."

Two years into the program, 4,700 employers and 1.2 million employees participate. The goal is to increase the number of employees to 2 million by next September. "We found that employers offering commuter benefits can influence between 15% to 30% of their employees to make a change. That's a pretty nice bump," Offutt says.

The program has no end date, but Offutt says its long-term goal is to effect "market transformation." Today, you expect a good employer to offer a primary package of benefits including health care, 401k and the like. The EPA's goal is to make commuter benefits primary — a given like health benefits — within about 10 years.

"When we reach that point, then we can move on to something else," Offutt says.

BWC is voluntary and non-regulatory — meaning they won't check up on participants — and was modeled on the EPA's EnergyStar program that rates the energy efficiency of appliances. To qualify, employers must provide emergency rides home for employees who don't drive their cars to work; offer at least one of three primary benefits; and three from a long list of secondary benefits. Primary benefits include implementing a telework program that reduces the number of employee rides by 6%; \$30 or more in monthly transit passes; and parking cashout, which means the employer pays the employee at least 75% of the total parking costs (or a minimum of \$30 per month) for relinquishing his or her parking space. Secondary benefits include things such as rideshare matching, shuttles from transit stations and employer-run vanpools. (The Web site offers a long list.)

In addition, employers must provide the EPA a point of contact, and submit an annual update with its commuting benefits efforts. Companies are counted by site, meaning a company such as IBM has six Best Workplaces for Commuters programs under its belt. Eventually, Offutt's team will compile and analyze the data, and offer it back to the employers as a way to help optimize their programs.

We say all the time that telework isn't for everyone. What's neat about commuter benefits programs is that they give companies that can't or won't practice telework a chance to do their part to stem air pollution. Offutt says 25% of air pollutants are caused by ground transportation.

"We're EPA, so we're interested in of course reducing pollution. Ultimately that's what we're getting at in the end," he says.

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